

The Cultural Relevance of the
“Grand Theft Auto” Video Game Series

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Since its first release in 1997, the video game series *Grand Theft Auto* has drawn much controversy, primarily because of the inclusion of violent and sexual themes within the games. Critics of the games argue that they hold no redeeming values at all and even label them “a hands-on baptism in amoral and sociopathic violence” (Small, 2002). When critics vilify the *Grand Theft Auto* games, they ignore the fact that these games are extremely complex. This complexity extends not just to the game environment, but also into characterization and plotlines. Through an examination of the three most recent major *Grand Theft Auto* game releases (*Grand Theft Auto III*, released in 2001; *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, released in 2002; and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, released in 2004), the commentary on culture, politics, and society becomes far more overt. When combined with the complex characters and plots, the *Grand Theft Auto* games become far more relevant to modern America and reflects its cultural values, and are thus worth studying in a scholarly manner.

Grand Theft Auto is not the only complex video game series in existence. As new generations of video game systems and computer hardware are brought into the market, the games developed for them become increasingly complex, not just in their graphics but also in their rules and level design. Journalist Stephen Johnson accurately comments on this trend towards increasing complexity. “Most of today's games force kids to learn complex rule systems, master challenging new interfaces, follow dozens of shifting variables in real time and prioritize between multiple objectives” (Johnson, 2005). The *Grand Theft Auto* (henceforth referred to as *GTA*) series, however, creates an additional level of complexity through its environment. Instead of having the player progress through a series of levels, the *GTA* series places the player within a virtual city populated with pedestrians, gang members, police officers, and others. The players then have the choice of taking on various missions within this city, or can just drive around according to their own whim. This “sandbox” style of game play forces the players into a **multi-**

valued orientation, where they can chart multiple routes through the virtual cities, and use several different methods to complete each of the missions and make progression through the game. Interestingly, the final missions in each of the three major *GTA* games all force players into a **two-valued orientation**. These final missions all involve a massive battle of the player's character against several dozen heavily armed enemies. In *GTA III*, the player takes the role of an unnamed criminal in Liberty City who was betrayed by his girlfriend Catalina and shot in the head during a bank heist. After progressing through the game by aiding various crime lords and mafia bosses, the final mission involves the player taking revenge on Catalina and killing her gang of drug dealers, before finally killing her by shooting down her helicopter (*GTA III*, 2002). The other *GTA* games follow this formula for the final mission, where the player no longer has the freedom to discover alternate routes, and has no choice but to kill or be killed.

Violent scenes such as the final missions are the primary critique against the games being culturally relevant, but these final missions help demonstrate the elaborate storylines that make up the games. Although the plot of *GTA III* is a basic revenge tale, the plots of the subsequent two games become increasingly complex, and offer a greater level of character depth. The player's character in *GTA III* is not named, does not speak a single word throughout the game, and overall shows a distinct lack of emotion, even when confronting his former girlfriend who betrayed him. This **ambivalence** is not used just as a defense mechanism, but is also present in order to create a neutral figure who the player can take control of and not feel constrained with. This character does not have his own personality, but instead serves as a neutral outlet for the player's competing **ID** and **superego**. This changes, however, with the two subsequent games. Within *Vice City*, the player's character is Tommy Vercetti, a former convict who is sent to Vice City to run drug deals for the mob. When a drug deal goes wrong, Tommy has to get his money back and ultimately take over the entire city as a crime lord (*Vice City*, 2003). The third game,

San Andreas, shifts away from a mafia or crime lord theme into more of a gang theme. The player's character in *San Andreas* is Carl "CJ" Johnson, a gang member who moved away to Liberty City five years earlier after the death of his brother. Returning to the state of San Andreas after the murder of his mother at the beginning of the game, Carl is framed for the murder of a police officer by the corrupt cop Frank Tenpenny. As the game progresses, the plot of *San Andreas* become increasingly complex, with family relationships, friendships, and betrayals all featured as Carl attempts to discover who murdered his mother and tries to break free of the influence of Tenpenny. (San Andreas, 2005).

Through these increasingly elaborate environments and plot structure, the *GTA* series uses an interesting form of **time binding**. Each game builds upon both the storyline and the technical capabilities of the previous games. This becomes obvious when examining the game environments. *GTA III* featured the city of Liberty City, which was comprised of three small islands (GTA III, 2002). The environment of *Vice City* was two large islands and was twice as large as Liberty City. This improvement on the game environment continued in the third game *San Andreas*. San Andreas is not merely a single city, but instead is an entire state comprised of three complete cities; Los Santos, San Fierro, and Las Venturas; along with all the countryside in between. The environment of San Andreas is roughly six times larger than that of Vice City (San Andreas, 2005). By continuing to improve the technical capabilities of the games with each new release, the developers increase not only the environments, but also the complexity of the game mechanics. In *GTA III* the only vehicles were cars and boats. This expanded in *Vice City*, where the player could now drive motorcycles and helicopters. The trend continues in *San Andreas*, where players can not only control vehicles such as trains and planes, but can also attend schools in order to improve their driving or flying skills. Additionally, the players' control of their character is more complex in *San Andreas*, where they have to clothe, feed, and exercise Carl

Johnson. If Carl eats too much he will get fat, and if he exercises then he will become extremely muscular and have a higher stamina and sex appeal. (San Andreas, 2005). The players' interactions with the game environments can also provide excellent and subtle social commentary. Art historian Soraya Murray elaborates on this detail. "It becomes important to note that in CJ's neighborhood, like many underserved inner-city areas, the only three restaurants in town offer fast food: burgers, fried-chicken, or pizza" (Murray, 2005, p. 96). This subtle critique of American society enhances the cultural relevance of the game series, and occurs in all three of the games. All three feature a store called Ammu-Nation where the players can purchase weaponry. The slogan for Ammu-Nation is "for all your daily firearm needs", parodying the perceived violence and prevalence of guns in American culture (San Andreas, 2005). Murray comments on these parodies of American violence as well. "Presented are a series of American clichés, packaged, marketed, and sold back to us. The game seems equal parts social commentary and logical cultural outcome of combining America's ruthless capitalistic impulse with a valorized national legacy of barbarism" (Murray, 2005, p. 91). Some of this social commentary occurs not through the environments, but rather through use of stereotypical and exaggerated characters.

The *GTA* games use lots of stereotyping in order to create their city environments. Pedestrians and minor characters act as caricatures in order to increase the humor within the games and even to demonstrate how American society views such figures. In *Vice City*, the game radio includes a talk-radio station that features several guests, all of whom are extreme stereotypes. This includes Pastor Richards, the fundamentalist evangelical minister who is lobbying for funds to build a large statue of himself within Vice City; Congressman Alex Shrub, the right-wing politician who constantly raises taxes and is always on guard against communism; and Jan Brown, the founder of the group "Moms Against Popular Culture", who lobbies in a

shrill and outraged voice about any possible threat towards her children. (*Vice City*, 2003). The radio interactions between these stereotypes creates lots of humor for the player, and this humor is prevalent throughout all the games. The game environments include several puns in them, many of which are sexual in nature. A desert town in San Andreas includes a statue of a giant chicken, labeled “the world's biggest cock”. The secretive military compound in San Andreas is called “Area 69”, acting both as a sexual pun and a reference to Area 51 (*San Andreas*, 2005). Through the **humor** these environments create and the **exaggeration** of the stereotypical characters, the *GTA* series prevents the games from becoming too dark, acting as an imposed defense mechanism in order to keep the players from becoming tense and taking the games too seriously.

Beyond creating humor, stereotypes serve several purposes for the games. These are to create enemies that the player will have no qualms about killing in massive numbers. While this is seen to a degree with the mafia cartels in *GTA III* and *Vice City*, it becomes most apparent in the gang battles of *San Andreas*. Part of this game's dynamic is to have Carl and his gang, Grove Street Families, take over rival gang territory. This is a literal example of **territoriality**, for when Carl conquers new territory, he gains money and respect. All of the rival gangs within the city of Los Santos are presented in a stereotypical manner. The members of the Vagos gang are all clearly Hispanic, all wear similar yellow clothing and bandannas, and all drive the same model of car. This creates a situation where the player can tell if a pedestrian is a gang member through ethnicity or the color of their clothes alone. This is actually useful in creating a **signal reaction**, especially when taking over gang territories and killing rival gang members. When the players see a pedestrian wearing gang colors, they are conditioned to immediately attack and kill those gang members by any means necessary. As mentioned before, this behavior is rewarded, for after killing a large number of rival gang members, Carl is rewarded with that gang territory

and his reputation increases. (San Andreas, 2005).

Beyond physical portrayals, stereotyping is also present in the psychology of the game characters themselves. These interactions between the characters help demonstrate how elaborate the plot lines of the games really are. In *San Andreas*, Carl Johnson travels to the city of San Fierro partway through the game and aids the Chinese Triad gang against a group of drug smugglers who are led by a man named Toreno. Carl himself is guilty of stereotyping when he assumes that Toreno is the same as any other drug dealer. This becomes clear when Carl meets up with Toreno later in the game and talks with him. “Man, you ain't nothin' but a fucking yayo dealer anyway, Toreno.” Carl says. Carl's **failure to index** is soon corrected by Toreno, who explains that he is far more than just a drug dealer. “I work for a government agency,” Toreno says to Carl. “Yes, when we last met, I was involved in battling threats in Latin America, by any means necessary. That does not make me a drug dealer” (San Andreas, 2005). Realizing that his initial perception of Toreno was incorrect, Carl now has to **index** Toreno properly and revise his opinions and stereotypes based on the information that Toreno is actually a government agent..

Characters in *San Andreas* exhibit other additional psychological qualities that contribute to their complexity. The character Big Smoke, a former friend of Carl who betrays him and becomes powerful drug dealer, demonstrates several of these. During the final mission of the game where Carl confronts Big Smoke, Big Smoke identifies with Carl. “Look at you, you got the whole world. I ain't got no regrets, man.” Big Smoke cries out to Carl before they battle. “I made it, CJ! I'm a success. I can't be touched!” (San Andreas, 2005). In addition to this **goal oriented identification**, characters such as the corrupt police officer Frank Tenpenny try to get Carl to **identify with an aggressor**. While giving Carl a mission within the city of Las Venturas, Tenpenny tries to reason with Carl and convince him that they are similar. “We're all the same, Carl,” Tenpenny says. “You, me. We're all trying to pull ourselves out of the hole”

(San Andreas, 2005). This attempt at convincing Carl fails, and Tenpenny is forced to issue **direct orders** to Carl in order to gain his compliance, after hitting him in the stomach. “How do you like that, you piece of shit? That give you any idea how edgy I am? Get up, bitch! You paying attention? There's some piece of shit DEA officer meeting with an FBI agent with a dossier. Now you get the dossier and you make both of them disappear” (San Andreas, 2005).

The ability to issue orders is equated with power not only within *San Andreas*, but in all three of the *GTA* games. In *GTA III* the direct orders are all given by the crime or mafia bosses to the player's character. Of all the bosses who give orders, **indirect orders** are given in only a few instances. Even in these cases, the indirect orders are always followed up by more explicit instructions about the mission. This is readily apparent with the Yakuza boss Kenji, as he gives the player a mission to rescue one of his gang members from jail. “Perhaps you can help deal with a situation that has me at a disadvantage. Of course, failure has its own disgrace.” This indirect order is followed by more specific commands. Kenji continues: “A Yakuza Kanbu is in custody awaiting transfer for trial. He is a valued member of the family. Break him out of custody and get him to the dojo at Bedford Point” (GTA III, 2002). In situations such as this, the indirect orders are not used alone, but rather serve the function of **phatic communication** in order to provide an introduction to the more specific commands. The reasons for this are simple. As these orders are being given in the context of a game, the **directive use of language** needs to be utilized so that players know what they need to do in the missions. Indirect orders may not give the players enough information about needs to be done.

This use of language is seen not only in tertiary characters who give missions to the player, but also within the main character Tommy Vercetti in *Vice City*. This happens once he begins to take power for himself and gains followers, something that does not occur in *GTA III*. Midway through the game, Tommy kills the drug baron Ricardo Diaz and takes over his

business. After this occurs, Tommy begins to issue orders to others, in order to demonstrate his new power. In one mission, Tommy bosses around two of his gang members. “You two, off your asses. Let's go,” he commands, ordering them to accompany him (Vice City, 2003). These interactions and the perceptions of power they create all enhance the deep story of the *GTA* games. This story, in turn, adds depth and complexity to the city environments in the games.

While the *Grand Theft Auto* series has generated much controversy, the games nevertheless have become extremely popular and profitable. According to statistics compiled by journalist Seth Schiesel, the series has sold over 21 million games since 2001 and has generated 924 million dollars in revenue (Schiesel, 2005). This popularity only accentuates the cultural impact that these games have, and show why they need to be studied critically. Even though many dismiss them as worthless due to the violent and sexual content, an analysis of the games show that they include very complex story lines and characters set within complex environments, and also provide subtle commentary about American society within a humorous framework. All of the *Grand Theft Auto* games include deep plots and all are set in a contemporary American setting. It would therefore be harmful to ignore them and the social messages that they deliver to the player. By examining these games, scholars can learn more about the dynamics of the culture and society that created them.

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